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# A Voyage into The Abyss – A Look Into The First Year of The Jamestown Settlement


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**A Voyage into The Abyss – A Look Into The  
First Year of The Jamestown Settlement**

By Austin Valentine Jr.

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## **Introduction**

Prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, many in England looked toward territorial expansion, but such thoughts were commonly restrained by the ruling monarchs. One such thought is best exhibited in a 1584 writing by Richard Hakluyt, an English writer who was an advocate for such territorial expansion (Encyclopedia 2016).

Hakluyt wrote a piece called *A Discourse Concerning Western Planting*, in which he spoke of great riches that await England to the west. He justifies expansion as not simply a means of economic growth, but as an exigent military need as well. In his writing states that such areas contain "...plenty of excellent tress for masts of goodly timber to build ships and to make great navys, of pitch, tar, hemp, and all things incident for a navy royall, and that for no price, and without money or request (Hakluyt 1584)."

Richard Hakluyt further addresses how the King of Spain, by this time has already tapped into these very resources in his western colonization. Hakluyt implies that it was the duty of England to peruse such ventures to maintain control as a global power and not fall victim to the growing Spanish empire. He cites such expansion "...this realm shall have by that means ships of great burden and of great strength form the defense of this realm (Hakluyt 1584)."

Pleas such as Hakluyt's coupled with the knowledge of Spain's colonization of Florida in the 1560's, provoked England to act in haste (Kupperman 2013, 60). In response Queen Elizabeth I of England decided to brush aside previously failed attempts to settle the new world and granted an expedition the wherewithal to establish an English colony in the new world. The expedition, headed by Sir Walter Raleigh, tried to establish a settlement called Roanoke in 1585.

However, Raleigh's attempt failed which resulted in the loss of the entire colony (Royal Museums Greenwich n.d.).

It wasn't until nearly two decades later that such expansion again came up amongst the English royalty. In the wake of a failed attempt in colonization at Roanoke and the death of Queen Elizabeth I, many questioned if England would make another attempt at the new world. However, these questions were laid to rest with the new monarchy, King James I of England. King James began to focus more attention on the new world. For him this was far from territorial expansion, his ideology possessed overtones of a more business and economic nature and not simply territorial expansion.

In 1606 he granted the Virginia Company of London a charter to establish a colony, which would be the country's second major attempt at colonization to reach the banks of the new world. The Virginia Company, which consisted of shareholders as well as a governing board, saw items like gold, precious minerals, tar, pitch, and other valuable resources as a basis for future economic trade between the new world and England (Nash 2015, 45-46). John Smith points out in his journal that "... investors hoped settlers would find valuable natural resources, such as lumber, herbs, pitch, and even gold, to send back to England. However, the English government also wanted to resist the Spanish colonization of North America (Smith 2018)."

The organization secured three sailing vessels, the Discovery, Godspeed, and the Susan Constant, which were placed under the command of Captain Christopher Newport. The company boarded one hundred-ten men and boys on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December of 1606 and set sail from London for the new world, only stopping for a brief period in the West Indies to obtain necessary provisions (Lockyer 2013, 502). The settlers consisted of gentlemen, laborers, carpenters, a blacksmith, a barber, a bricklayer, a mason, a surgeon, and a sail maker (Humble Independent

School District 2018). However, only 104 of the original 110 would survive the lengthy journey (Smith, American Journeys 2018).

The party finally made landfall in the new world on April of 1607, in an area they named Jamestown after King James I of England. The expedition, similar to the Roanoke party, was also marked with distress and tragedy, which nearly cost England the loss of a second new world settlement. Presenting the question; In the wake of the Roanoke disaster, why were settlers so unprepared for the venture that lay ahead and what caused such distress in trying to colonize the new world?

## **Land Ho – The Construction of Jamestown Fort**

In April of 1607 Master George Percy, who was on the voyage from London to the new world, wrote in his journal about the initial sighting of land: “... The six and twentieth day of April, about four o’clock in the morning, we described the Land of Virginia. The same day we entered into the Bay of Chesupioc [Chesapeake] directly, without any let or hindrance. There we landed and discovered a little way, but we could find nothing worth the speaking of, but fair meadows and goodly tall Trees, with such Fresh-waters running through the woods, as I was almost ravished at the sight thereof (Percy 1606).”

The land which Master Percy speaks became known as the Jamestown settlement, named after King James I of England. Upon arrival, George Percy describes the settlers first hostile encounter with the local natives “...there came the Savages creeping upon all fours, from the Hills like Bears, with their Bows in their mouths, charged us desperately in the faces, hurt Captain Gabriel Archer in both his hands, and a sailor in two places of the body very dangerous. After they had spent their Arrows, and felt the sharpness of our shot, they retired into the Woods with a great noise, and so left us (Percy 1606).”

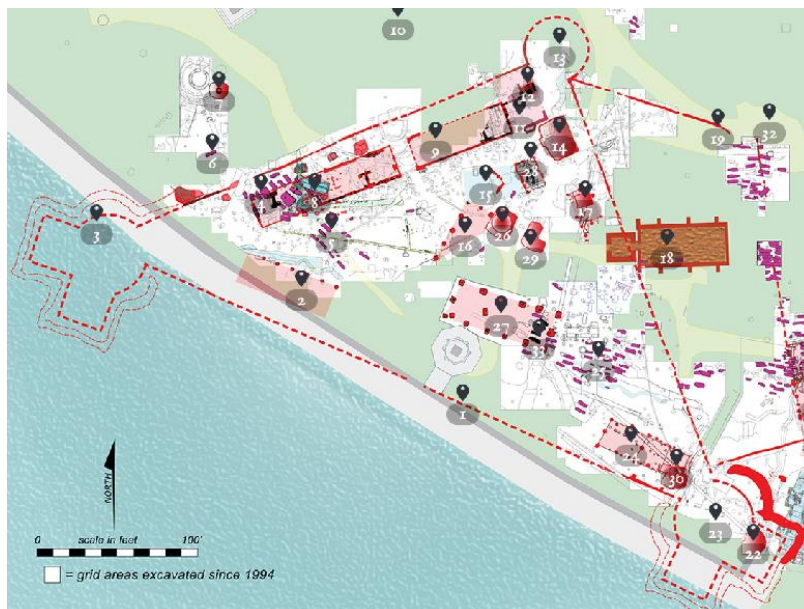
This interaction provoked the settlers to begin construction of a protective fortification. Percy writes that by June 15<sup>th</sup> of 1607 they had finished building a triangular shaped fort, which consisted of three half-moon shaped



Early Spanish spy map drawing of Jamestown Fort prior to discovery (*Jametown Rediscovery 2018*)

bulwarks or palisades at every corner. And, that each palisade had four or five pieces of artillery mounted within its protection (Jamestown Rediscovery 2018).

Settler William Starchey further wrote in 1614 that the fortification at Jamestown consisted of fourteen foot high walls, two of which were one-hundred yards in length and a third that was one-hundred-twenty yards (Jamestown Rediscovery 2018).



Map of the Current Jamestown Rediscovery Site (*Jamestown Rediscovery 2018*)

The fortification described by Sir George Percy and William Starchey has since been found by archaeologists. 382 years later in 1994, archaeologists with the Jamestown Rediscovery Project located the remains of the historic site and confirm settler's accounts of the

fortification at the Jamestown settlement (Jamestown Rediscovery 2018). Researchers have determined the fort was definitely triangular in shape and enclosed approximately 1.75 acres. They also note the fortification was well constructed and strategically placed to command the high ground. Excavations at the site still continue today, over twenty years later, and still produce new and interesting finds daily (Rosen, Jamestown Rediscovery - A World Uncovered 2016).



## **Sickness and Death**

Feeling the colonists were safe and established within their fortification, Captain Newport and his three ships which brought the settlers to the new world left James Fort. Newport began his twenty week return voyage to England to obtain supplies on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June. It was shortly thereafter when the real trouble began at the Jamestown settlement (Legends of America 2018). However, settlers such as George Percy seemed to disagree with the Captain's assessment. Percy writes the following: "Captain Newport being gone for England, leaving us very bare and scanty of victuals, furthermore in wars and in danger of the Savages... (Percy 1606)"

He explained in his writings how they had corn planted and were surrounded with number of plentiful fruit trees and berries. Despite the rich soil and plentiful fruits, the residents of the colony began to experience sickness and death shortly after Captain Newport left for England. Capt. John Smith writes in his diary that "The low marshy land was not healthy, and clean water could be difficult to find (Smith, American Journeys 2018)."

On August 6<sup>th</sup> Percy writes "The sixth of August there died John Asbie of the bloody Flux (Percy 1606)." The Bloody Flux being known as dysentery, which is a gastrointestinal disorders. Such illness results intestinal problems identified by fever, diarrhea, and bloody stools (Merriam-Webster 2018).

Percy points out that a number of the settlers died of fluxes, swellings, fevers, and by native attack. By the fourth day of September, just seventy-four days after Captain Newport had left, twenty-one of the Jamestown settlers had already died (Percy 1606). What was most

remarkable was the swift onset of illness and the loss of 19% of settlers in the first 2 ½ months of being alone.

Percy writes “There were never Englishmen left in a foreign Country in such misery as we were in this new discovered Virginia. We watched every three nights. Lying on the bare cold ground, what weather soever came waited all the next day which brought our men to be most feeble wretches. Our food was but a small Can of Barley sod in water, to five men a day, our drink cold water taken out of the River, which was at a flood very salty, at a low tide full of slime and filth, which was the destruction of many of our men. Thus we lived for the space of five months in this miserable distress, not having five able men to man our Bulwarks upon any occasion (Percy 1606).” Sir George Percy making note of the living conditions was the demise of the colonist, citing a lack of food stores and drinking of salt water that is littered with filth.

The writings of Sir George Percy indicate a tone hesitation among the settlers about being left alone in the new world. In their minds, they were on a voyage to obtain goods and establish an economic base. The settlers felt they were not on a mission of English territorial expansion. Therefore, when the ships left for England, many felt they should have been on board. However, they were left behind and just weeks into being alone they began to exhibit violent illnesses.

Over 400 years later, present day researchers are now trying to attribute these symptoms in an effort to formulate an explanation of the sickness and death that occurred among the settlers. Many hypothesis's have been proposed from illness due human waste in the water supply to poisoning by Spanish spies (Jamestown Rediscovery 2018). However, none have been able to explain what took place with a high degree of accuracy. Aside from native attack, something at the Jamestown site caused the original settlers a great level of physical distress. A

distress whose clues exist only in the writings of the settlers and in the artifacts recovered at the Jamestown Archaeological Site.

## **Possible Spanish Plot**

Protestant England's establishment of a colony at Jamestown, Virginia put Catholic Spain on notice. England let Spain know the new world was not going to all be Spanish held territory nor completely ruled by Catholicism. Therefore, the Spanish kept an eye on the Jamestown settlement through Spain's extensive network of spies in both the Caribbean as well as back in London (Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation 2018). However, this rivalry between England and Spain was not a new quarrel. Religious differences between both Spain and England date back to England's split from the Catholic church under the reign of King Henry VIII.

Through the years a number of plots had been planned to dispose of the English Protestant monarchy in an effort to place a ruler on the throne who would bring Catholicism back to England. Plots such as The Northern Rebellion of 1569, The Babington Plot of 1586, and The Ridolfi Plot of 1571 were all plots to restore the Catholic faith in England (Lockyer 2013).

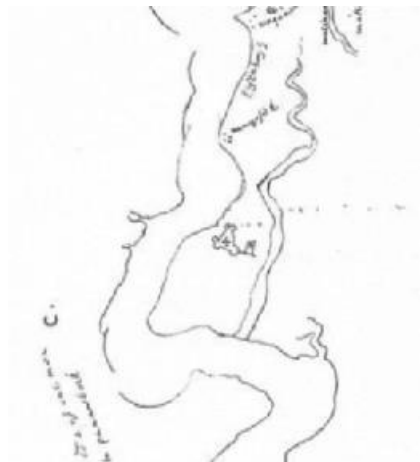
Another well-known plot was The Gun Powder Plot, which occurred during the reign of King James I. The event took place in 1605, just one year prior to the Virginia Company's Jamestown charter. This particular plot ended up being a foiled attempt to blow up Parliament as well as King James I of England on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 1605. Spanish sympathizer Guy Fawkes was discovered in the cellar of Parliament with a number of kegs or barrels of gunpowder. Therefore, he was found guilty of treason and executed (History 2018).

However, suspicion of treason was not just isolated to England. Such thoughts also found their way into the Jamestown settlement. Captain George Kendall, who was one of the first settlers and a member of the Jamestown council was tried and convicted under the suspicion of

being a Spanish traitor and spy. The end result was his execution in 1608 by firing squad (History 2018).

Today, many feel that Jamestown may have also fell victim to the very conspiracies the were taking place hundreds of miles away in the mother country of England. Evidence found at the Jamestown Rediscovery Archaeology site provides concrete proof that Catholicism was within the colony and must have been practiced by some of the colonist. Catholic Roseries and Crosses have been found among the thousands of artifacts found at the Jamestown site (Schreiber and Lipworth 2018).

This ideology is further substantiated by a hand-drawn copy of a map, which may have been originally drawn by Captain John Smith. The conflict is not with who had created the map, but where the map had been located. This particular cartograph was found to have been in the possession of Don Pedro de Zúñiga, who was the Spanish ambassador to England during the early 1600's. The map had been sent to King Philip III of Spain in September of 1608, showing a rudimentary drawing of the Chesapeake Bay, Tidewater, and Jamestown Fort (Encyclopedia Virginia 2018).



A portion of the Zúñiga Chart  
(*Encyclopedia Virginia* 2018)

Such a transfer of English intelligence to a Spanish rule opens the eyes of today's conspiracy theorist. Especially knowing the rocky religious history between England and Spain. This has triggered speculation that the misfortunes of the Jamestown settlers were not just mere coincidence nor accidents of nature. Some now feel they possess nuances of conspiracy, espionage, and murder.

Such has been speculated by Dr. Frank Hancock, a prominent pathologist, who feels that the misfortunes experienced among the Jamestown settlers may have been tied to Spain's desire to keep North America as a Catholic settlement. His years of experience and extensive research into causes of death leads him to believe the settlers at the Jamestown settlement fell victim to poisoning (Schreiber and Lipworth 2018).

Comparing the settler's symptoms, noted in both the journals of John Smith and William Percy, Dr. Hancock was able to hypothesize possible reasoning for their illnesses. He suggests the Jamestown settlers were poisoned by arsenic, which was found in a rat poison called ratsbane. Ratsbane or Arsenic-trioxide was a chemical that would have been aboard the ships to keep down the rat population from overrunning the ships food stores (Schreiber and Lipworth 2018).

However, Dr. Hancock's theory is unable to be proven without an actual tissue sample to test or documented proof from a conspirator. Without such proof, his theory can only remain an educated speculation at this point.

Dr. William Kelso director of Archaeology for the Jamestown rediscovery project feels that Dr. Hancock's theory is possible, but most likely not probable. He makes note that there are many other ways to die in the Virginia wilderness aside from being poisoned by a Spanish spy (Schreiber and Lipworth 2018).

## **Conclusion**

Starvation, homesickness, hostiles, poisoning, or dysentery, one can only speculate what caused the distress among the first settlers at Jamestown. Aside from speculation, there are a few factors that can be determined to the settler's credit, with respect to their stature and the construction of their fortification.

The settlers of Jamestown Fort were composed of the proper mix of individuals who could perform the tasks at hand. Researchers feel they made the correct choices in constructing their fortification to commanding the high ground yet maintain close proximity to the James River (Rosen, Jamestown Rediscovery - A World Uncovered 1997).

Archaeologists have also been able to determine that the fort was well-defended on all sides by both a palisade and artillery. Many researchers have further pointed out the settlers had knowledge of what to trade the local natives for goods, and how to plant and harvest food for themselves. Thus, making it hard for one to propose they were suffering from the lack of food and/or fresh water (Rosen, Jamestown Rediscovery - A World Uncovered 2016).

Yet, for one to propose they were only drinking salt water and eating meager rations, would suggest they were confined within the walls of Jamestown fort. Thus, implying they did not leave the fort's protection to scavenge for food. This is a scenario that is quite possible considering the violent history between the settlers and the hostile local natives.

George Percy explains a number of symptoms that could be attributed to a number of factors. However, one key phrase in his writings stand out to substantiate a claim that the settlers did not venture far from Jamestown fort. He states, "Our food was but a small Can of Barley sod in water, to five men a day, our drink cold water taken out of the River, which was at a flood

very salty, at a low tide full of slime and filth, which was the destruction of many of our men (Percy 1606).” His writing suggest the men were drinking salt-water littered with filth or human waste. However, researchers have pointed out that water supplies in London at the time were far more polluted and the residents had not died from dysentery at such a rate as that seen at Jamestown (Schreiber and Lipworth 2018).

As for the settlers to be eating their horses as well as resorting to consuming rats, one could only imagine the fear that was possessed by the settlers within those wooden walls at that time to perform such acts. However, the archaeological evidence confirms that this did take place at the Jamestown settlement (Schreiber and Lipworth 2018).

Such evidence brings us back to suggestions made by Dr. Hancock about Arsenic poisoning through the utilization of Ratsbane. It may have not been a Spanish spy at all, the settlers may have accidentally poisoned themselves by consuming rodents that had ingested Arsenic-trioxide? Like Dr. Hancock’s conspiracy theory, there is no concrete evidence that could substantiate such a claim at this time. Even though archaeological evidence and diary entries exists that confirm the settlers had consumed a number of black rats. Then who is to say those rats had or had not already ingested the deadly poison prior to their demise?

Aside from poisoning, starvation, or sickness, facts provided have determined the group wasn’t knowledgeable or ill equipped for the mission they were given. This group was sent to simply establish an economic base for England and not create a permanent English settlement. Therefore, one could reasonably say these men were not equipped for what they had arrived to find.



The Jamestown settlers possessed the ability to establish a base of operations and establish a post for trade between the new world and England. Yet, they did not possess the ability to stay behind and create a permanently self-sufficient colony that was void of English influence. One could state with some degree of accuracy that the Jamestown settlers were like the Spanish conquistadors, only in search of wealth and riches. These men and boys would have survived far better if there had been a steady interaction between the settlement and England throughout Jamestown's establishment. One could then suggest that the failures at Jamestown fort could be attributed to a simple matter of salutary neglect by England.

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